

Did the Church Start at Pentecost?

John R Ecob D.D.

Some teach that the Church did not begin until Acts 13 when the Gospel was preached to the Gentiles, and that baptism for believers was therefore only a Jewish rite that does not apply to the Church.

Scripture is clear that the Church began on the day of Pentecost when the disciples were baptized with the Holy Spirit. Believers' water baptism by immersion also began at Pentecost when 3,000 were baptized. This form of water baptism was not a continuation of that which was practiced by John the Baptist because when Paul found some who had been John's disciples they were rebaptized "*in the name of the Lord Jesus*" (Acts 19:5).

Neither John's baptism of repentance, nor the new covenant baptism in the name of the Lord Jesus, could save the soul. Both were a once-for-all testimony. The only reason for rebaptizing the believers who were disciples of John the Baptist was because **a new dispensation had arrived** and ALL who had been baptized under the old dispensation of Law were rebaptized in the name of the Lord Jesus signifying their identification with Christ as **the risen Saviour and Messiah**.

In the case of John's baptism it was a public declaration that the individual had repented and turned to God while new covenant baptism after Pentecost testified that the individual had already **believed on the Lord Jesus**, and were already saved under the new covenant in His blood. It was not a Jewish rite but a New Testament Church ordinance.

Baptism WITH the Spirit and Baptism BY the Spirit

Shortly before Jesus ascended, He told the disciples:

"Ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence" (Acts 1:5).

The "Church" is defined as those believers who, in this age of Grace, have been "*baptized WITH the Holy Spirit*" and thus have entered into the blessings of the new covenant and become partakers "*of the root and fatness of the olive tree*" (Israel) (Rom. 11:17). God promised to make a new covenant with "*the house of Israel, and with the house*"

of Judah” in the last days (Jer.31:31) when individuals would be permanently indwelt by the Spirit (Ezek.36:27).

In addition to the indwelling Spirit, believers are baptized BY the Spirit **into the body** of Christ (1Cor.12:13) placing the Church “*in Christ*”. Only the Church is “*in Christ*”. The Church was baptized **with and by** the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, and has tapped into Israel’s new covenant blessings.

Jews and Gentiles under the Old Covenant

It has been argued that God only has a covenant relationship with Israel, but this is only partly true. Saved Gentiles in the Old Testament era shared in the covenants with Israel, and were circumcised as the sign of the covenant when they renounced their heathen gods and turned to the God of Israel.

*“And when a stranger (Gentile) shall sojourn with thee, and will keep the passover to the LORD, let all his males be circumcised, and then let him come near and keep it; and he shall be as one that is born in the land: for no uncircumcised person shall eat thereof. **One law shall be to him that is homeborn, and unto the stranger that sojourneth among you**” (Exod.12:48-49).*

Unsaved Gentiles are “*strangers from the covenants of promise*” (Eph.2:12), but saved Gentiles are “*made nigh by the blood of Christ*” and Christ is our peace who “*hath made both one...that he might reconcile BOTH (Jew and Gentile) unto God **in one body** by the cross*” (Eph.2:13-16). Paul defines the Church as Christ’s “*body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all*” (Eph.1:23).

When Did the Church Begin?

Well, did the Church begin at Pentecost? After Peter preached, 3,000 souls gladly received the word. Then we read:

“And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be (were being) saved” (Acts 2:47).

That statement alone should put the matter beyond all doubt, but when people espouse a wrong doctrine they can reject the obvious and seek obscure reasons to support their case. Long before believers began to preach to the Greeks at Antioch, while the Apostles were still meeting in the Jewish Temple, we read that

“great fear came upon all the church, and upon as many as heard these things. ... and they were all with one accord in Solomon’s porch” (Acts 5:11-12).

After the martyrdom of Stephen, as recorded in Acts chapter 7, we read:

*“At that time there was a great persecution against **the church** which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad... As for Saul, he made havock of the church, entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison” (Acts 8:1-3).*

After the persecution which arose about Stephen, believers were scattered and some went to Antioch where they preached to the Gentiles.

“Then tidings of these things came unto the ears of the church which was in Jerusalem” (Acts 11:22).

Barnabas was sent to Antioch, and after he found Saul (Paul), *“a whole year they assembled themselves with the church (at Antioch), and taught much people. And the disciples were called Christians first in Antioch” (Acts 11:26).*

All of these things happened BEFORE we read in Acts 13:46:

“It was necessary that the word of God should FIRST have been spoken to you (Jews): but seeing ye put it from you, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, lo, we turn to the Gentiles” (Acts 13:46).

Three times in Romans, Paul states:

“The Jew first, and also to the Gentile” (Rom. 1:16; 2:9,10).

Those who hold that the Church began in Acts 13 seek to insert **an extra Jewish dispensation** between Acts 2 and Acts 13. They claim that after Acts 13 the Church is a Gentile Church, and that the revelation of the mystery of the Church as the body of Christ applied only to the Gentiles. They then deny water baptism for believers in this age of the Church claiming it was a Jewish rite, in spite of the Lord’s express command to

*“Go ye therefore, and teach **ALL NATIONS**, baptizing **THEM** in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost” (Matt.28:19).*

It is true that the Church in its infancy was predominantly Jewish, but it was still the Church. Cornelius and the Ethiopian eunuch were Gentiles in the Church, and Jewish proselytes (Acts 2:10) were Gentiles in the Church before Acts 13. The Samaritans were not Jews, but they believed the Gospel and when Peter went to them *“they received the Holy Ghost”*, thereby being indwelt under the New Covenant and becoming members of the Church (Acts 8:17).

Three Offers of the Kingdom to Israel

Why then did the Apostles call on Israel nationally to repent, and offer *“the restitution of all things”* (Acts 3:21)? The parable of the marriage of the king’s son explains God’s purpose. We read:

“The kingdom of heaven is like unto a certain king, which made a marriage for his son, And sent forth his servants to call them that were bidden to the wedding: and they would not come” (Matt.22:2-3).

The king sent forth his servants again and they were spitefully used and slain. Then the king’s army burned their city and destroyed the murderers. Finally the king sent his servants into the highways and invited all to the marriage supper and provided a marriage garment for all guests. One man who came without a wedding garment was cast into *“outer darkness”* (Matt.22:13). Please note that THREE invitations were given to Israel.

1) The **first invitation** was to Israel in the days of the Lord’s earthly ministry. The message was, *“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand”*. It met with opposition and apathy, but not with violence until Christ was arrested. The parable simply states: *“They would not come”* (Matt.22:3).

2) The **second invitation** was to the nation AFTER Pentecost. It was a genuine offer of the kingdom, but it produced a violent reaction:

“The remnant took his servants, and entreated them spitefully, and slew them” (Matt.22:6).

This **second invitation** by the Apostles offered the kingdom to Israel upon repentance (Acts 3:19-21; Acts 15:13-18). It was after Pentecost, and the Jewish leaders responded with violence against the Church. The servants who made the offer were the foundation members of the Church; the Apostles.

What seems to be overlooked by those who teach that the Church did not begin until Acts 13, is that the Church is “*neither Jew nor Greek*” but “*all one in Christ Jesus*” (Gal.3:28). The predominantly Jewish character of the Church in its infancy made not the slightest difference; it was still the Body of Christ.

The consequence of Israel’s rejection of this second invitation was that their city (Jerusalem) was burned and the murderers destroyed in AD70.

The genuine offer of the kingdom made to Israel after Pentecost in no way proves that the Church did not begin until Israel rejected the second invitation. The understanding of the “*mystery*” of the Church was given by revelation to Paul, as indicated in Eph.3:1-9, Col.1:24-29 and Rom.16:25-26, but the Church existed from the day of Pentecost. It fulfilled its first task of offering the kingdom to Israel, and when this offer was rejected, it turned its attention to the Gentiles.

Someone may ask, If the Jews had repented, would Christ have returned at that time? To which we answer, God was bound to send Christ **IF the Jews repented**. The Church Age would have been very short; just a few years. However, in God’s foreknowledge, God knew Israel would not repent and Jesus indicated there would be a third invitation to Israel before the wedding feast was furnished with guests at His second coming.

3) **The third invitation** will be given to Gentiles and Jews as individuals after the Rapture and the Gospel of the Kingdom will be preached by Jews “*in all the world for a witness unto all nations*” (Matt.24:14). It will go to all and sundry on the highways of the world; to “*both bad and good*” (Matt.22:10). All who come receive a wedding garment; the robe of Christ’s righteousness under the New Covenant. The Church will never be a guest at the marriage supper of the King’s Son. **The Church is the Bride!**

The third call cannot apply to the Church, for those who come are only **guests** at the marriage of the King’s Son. The Church is entirely absent from this parable. As is the case of all parables, **they are pre-Church Age and must be interpreted in a Jewish context**. The Church must be present at the marriage feast because

she is the Bride of the King's Son, the Lord Jesus, however, the parable was pre-Church and was directed to Jews including the chief priests and Pharisees (Matt.21:45; 22:15). The context is entirely Jewish.

That Jews will be the preachers of the Gospel of the Kingdom during the Tribulation, is beyond doubt. There will be 144,000 Jews from the twelve tribes sealed as the *"servants of our God"* to testify during the first half of the seven-year Tribulation. Two special Jewish prophets will perform signs and wonders in Jerusalem during this period.

A great multitude of Gentiles from all *"nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues"* (Rev.7:9), *"both bad and good"*, will respond to the preaching, and *"all (surviving) Israel shall be saved"* (Rom.11:26). God will pour out His Spirit on Israel and the nation will be baptized *"with the Holy Ghost and with fire"* as John the Baptist warned (Luke3:16). The nation will enter into the New Covenant at this time, and those Gentiles who are saved through their preaching will also experience the New Covenant blessings as they identify with Israel.

Just as repentant Gentiles were circumcised as the sign of the Old Covenant in the Old Testament (Exod.12:48-49) so, under the future New Covenant during the Millennium, saved Gentiles will be circumcised (Ezek.44:9). God promised Abraham that *"in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed"* (Gen12:3).

Conclusion

The Church is comprised of individual Jews and Gentiles who have been baptized with the Spirit (indwelt) at the moment of conversion. They are also baptized BY the Holy Spirit into the body of Christ (the Church) (1 Cor.12:13). In this age the largely Gentile Church partakes of the *"root and fatness"* of the olive tree (Israel), but the Church is NOT *"spiritual Israel"*. The Church began at Pentecost with Jews and Gentiles in ONE BODY, and to teach otherwise is confusion.

At the end of this Church Age, at the Rapture, the Church will be removed and the Great Tribulation will begin. During the first half of the Tribulation Israel will again become God's witness.

on earth and enter into the promised New Covenant (Jer.31:31; Rom.11:25-27), the spiritual elements of which the Church now enjoys since she, as the *"wild olive branch"*, has been grafted into the Olive Tree during the period of Israel's chastening from God.

It was necessary for Israel to receive **three offers** of the kingdom and the instruments which God used to make those offers are:

- a) John the Baptist, the Lord and His Disciples, as recorded in the Gospels.
- b) The Apostles in the early Church on the day of Pentecost and,
- c) the 144,000 Jewish *"servants of our God"* in the first half of the Tribulation after the Church is removed at the Rapture.

The second invitation had to be from *"men of other tongues (languages) and other lips; and yet for all that will they not hear me, saith the Lord"* (1Cor.14:21). The Church's testimony in Gentile languages began on the day of Pentecost when the Apostles all preached in **Gentile languages**.

Did the Church begin with John the Baptist?

The suggestion that the Church began with John the Baptist is so absurd that it hardly requires comment however, there are some who teach this error.

Paul says the Church is

"built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit" (Eph.2:20-22).

The Apostles, NOT John the Baptist, were the "foundation" of the Church which is indwelt by the Holy Spirit who was **not given until Pentecost**. The Church is the habitation of God through the Spirit so it is impossible to have a Church on earth while the Old Covenant was still operative and before the Holy Spirit was given at Pentecost under the New Covenant.

Those who hold this view usually teach that it is by baptism that one becomes a member of a local church. The practice is used to give the pastor greater control over those they rebaptize.